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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 JEDDAH 000349

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [EINT](#) [KJUS](#) [KPAO](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [PINS](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#)
SA

SUBJECT: SAUDI BLOGGER SCARED INTO CURBING HIS ACTIVISM

REF: A. 08 RIYADH 005

[1](#)B. 08 JEDDAH 521

[1](#)C. 09 JEDDAH 119

JEDDAH 00000349 001.2 OF 002

Classified By: CG Martin Quinn for reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

1.(S) SUMMARY: Blogger Fouad Al-Farhan (strictly protect), previously imprisoned for criticizing Saudi authorities, contended that hard-liners in the Kingdom have grown more aggressive because they perceive that the USG is downplaying human rights. Al-Farhan sharply criticized the Saudi judicial system, and maintained that a group of political activists detained since February 2007 are not terrorists. He claimed the SAG was continuing to monitor him, and suspected he was still banned from traveling abroad. Despite ambitious plans to launch a news commentary "Huffington Post-style" website as well as a social networking website for Saudi teachers, Al-Farhan has largely curbed his activism to co-organizing a meeting for Saudi bloggers at a Jeddah coffee shop. END SUMMARY.

Blogger's worry about rise of the conservatives

[1](#)2. (S) During a conversation with CG and PolOffs in August, Saudi blogger Fouad Al-Farhan said the SAG is cracking down on critics due to perceptions in some circles that the Obama Administration is not pressing the issue of human rights. Reformers are on the defensive, said Al-Farhan, citing a progressive Saudi prince who now feels it necessary to publicly describe himself as against both Westernization and terrorism. Al-Farhan believes that most Saudis respect and appreciate King Abdullah and the direction in which he is moving the country, but he worries about the future leadership, especially Prince Nayif.

Saudi legal system, in blogger's words, "completely horrible"

[1](#)3. (S) Al-Farhan, who spent 137 days in solitary confinement until his release following an on-line global campaign to "Free Fouad," called the Saudi judicial system "completely horrible," and complained there were "no rights." Part of the problem is a shortage of judges, he claimed, noting that Saudi Arabia has only 800, while a smaller country like Kuwait has more than 1,000. Observing that because of their recent training, prison guards "don't torture you physically," Al-Farhan asserted that prison conditions remain

difficult and innocent persons are detained without trial. Al-Farhan stressed that former judge Suliman Ibrahim Al-Reshoudi and the others imprisoned since February 2007 are human rights activists, not terrorists. Al-Farhan was arrested after calling for their release and listing his "least favorite Saudi officials" on his blog (ref A).

Blogger's movements closely monitored while his travel ban

may still be in effect

14. (S) Al-Farhan claimed that Saudi authorities continue to monitor him and to interrogate his friends. According to Al-Farhan, as he entered the Consulate for his August meeting, a Saudi National Guardsman outside the Consulate told him, "The Colonel (Chief of the Investigative Unit at the Interior Ministry) sends his salaam." Al-Farhan, who was prevented from going to Beirut to speak at the Arab Free Press Forum in December 2008 (ref B), speculated that a ban on his travel remained in effect. He was unsure, as he had not attempted to leave the country since then and the Saudi passport office no longer tells applicants if they are banned from traveling. Al-Farhan said he has contacted a middleman to help him, refusing to return to the passport office himself since that would be interpreted as a sign that he did something wrong.

Blogger's ambitious plans for spreading concept of free
speech,

but limited action

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15. (S) Although he has curbed his activism following his release from prison (ref C), Al-Farhan said he is still "trying to take risks once in a while." He recently co-organized a short workshop on blogging at a Jeddah cafe for about 80 people, an activity he described as "not that risky." Despite limited advance publicity, he believes the Mabahith were present at the event. Al-Farhan did not request government permission to hold the session, joking that "don't ask, don't tell" is a useful tactic. He added that Shariah law allows freedom of assembly and he was not willing to request something that is already a right. Conceding that "freedom of assembly is not really grounded here" in the Kingdom, Al-Farhan explained that he and other activists are trying to bypass the limits on public gatherings by meeting in coffee shops. Asked about his other activities, Al-Farhan reiterated his plans to create a social networking site for Saudi teachers and a "Huffington Post-style" website, to be launched during Ramadan (Note: Fouad now says he is "not ready" to launch that news commentary website. Saudi newspapers recently reported that authorities are preparing a new law to license and regulate internet news websites. End note.) He also reported that he is working on a documentary about deficiencies in Jeddah living conditions, focusing in part on a girl who drowned in the sea off the Jeddah corniche in July 2009 allegedly because of discharge from a sewage outlet close to shore.

Blogging as empowerment -- a builder of "self-esteem" and

free speech

16. (S) Al-Farhan claims that through their blogging, he and other internet activists hope to spread the concept of free speech and respect for nations to young Saudis, who make up more than 50 percent of the population and who are "horribly abused by extremist speech." Al-Farhan believes that blogging builds self-esteem and makes people feel they have a right to criticize, although he admitted that Saudi citizens

cannot publicly call for political change. While young, U.S.-educated Saudis (like Al-Farhan) may call for change, he does not expect blogging in Saudi Arabia to work in the same way as in the United States. At the same time, Saudi women are as active as men on blogs and their blogging is perceived as "normal," as in America.

Simple call for more freedom -- over-reaction by authorities

17. (S) COMMENT: Clearly chastened (and intimidated) by his 4-month detention last year, Al-Farhan seemed eager to assure post that he is not proposing a new political model, just asking for "simple things," as he put it, such as more freedom to organize and socialize. He said he hoped the Saudi Mabahith had attended the Jeddah bloggers' meeting and heard his vision. The comments he had planned to make at the Beirut Free Press Forum last December were "not that bad," he maintained, and the travel ban was, from his perspective, an unnecessary over-reaction by the SAG. If Al-Farhan's claims of continued monitoring and restrictions are true, it appears the Saudi authorities are not yet convinced by his assertions that he is not challenging the established order. END COMMENT.
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